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The Easiest Possible Way to Increase Female Speakers at Conferences

A new study shows that having just one woman on the organizing committee for a conference greatly increases the likelihood of women appearing at the front of the room.

OLGA KHAZAN | JAN 7 2014, 7:07 AM ET

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Though they may lack the [overt frattiness](#) of certain tech gatherings, academic conferences in the sciences are often similarly prone to a quieter kind of sexism: the [all-male panel](#).

Women are still underrepresented as speakers at scientific conferences, something that hurts their career prospects in competitive academic fields where networking and showing off one's findings are crucial. And fewer women climbing to the top of their scientific disciplines also means fewer role models for younger women and girls as they choose careers.

Several solutions have been proposed: My colleague Becca Rosen, for example, [suggested that men](#) simply refuse to speak on all-male panels.

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But now it appears as though there's an even simpler way to try to stop a gender imbalance before the conference planning ever starts.

A new study in the journal *mbio* led by researchers at Yale University and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University says that to make scientific meetings less testosteroney, just make sure at least one woman is in charge of organizing it.

"Put at least one woman on the team that organizes a scientific symposium, and that team will be much more likely to invite female speakers," said study co-author Arturo Casadevall, chair of microbiology and immunology at Yeshiva University, [in a statement](#). The authors analyzed 460 symposia involving 1,845 speakers in two large meetings sponsored by the American Society for Microbiology, the General Meeting and the Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy.

Here's how big a difference a single woman makes:

The symposia convened by all-male teams contained 25 percent female speakers on average. For the symposia in which the convener teams included at least one woman, women comprised an average of 43 percent of speakers—which meant that including at least one woman among the conveners increased the proportion of female speakers by 72 percent compared with symposia convened by men alone.

Meanwhile, the researchers found that on average, 30 percent of meetings organized by a group of all men had sessions with all-male speakers.

Of course, sending out the right mix of invitations is only half the battle when it comes to correcting the gender imbalance at conferences.

Earlier this year, [researchers at the University of Sheffield](#) in the UK found that female biologists were underrepresented at a major conference in Europe, even when taking into account their comparatively smaller numbers. But the reason for the skewed demographics wasn't entirely the organizers' fault. Men, it seems, accepted the invitations more often than women did.

"The most demanding phase of a career in biology, when it is important to communicate one's findings, and to build networks with other scientists, coincides with the age at which women's fertility starts to decline, meaning it is their last chance to have a family," said Julia Schroeder, a scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Germany, [in a statement](#). "Stay-at-home-dads are rare, therefore, these women are less flexible about traveling for work, and may be more likely to decline invitations to speak."

Women in science could clearly benefit from friendlier regulations on childcare and work-life balance. But another reason for the high invitation-decline rate could be that, because there are fewer female scientists, and conference organizers seek them out for diversity purposes, female scientists in some niche fields might find that they can't accept all of them, particularly if doing so means traveling and they are the primary parent. ([Alice Coe described the same phenomenon happening](#) with service requests for female academics: The more requests to sit on university committees or provide special tutoring sessions

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female academics accept, the less time they have for publishing.)

These are complicated policy issues, but we should still err on the side of inviting women, and leaving the decision to accept up to them.

15

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OLGA KHAZAN is an associate editor at *The Atlantic*, where she covers health.

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badphairy · 20 days ago

I would have just said "invite them to speak". Apparently men really don't want to hear what women have to say.

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wootness → badphairy · 20 days ago

How sexist of you.

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Barnadine_the_Pirate → badphairy · 20 days ago

Didn't read the article, did you?

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Sheng Nu · 20 days ago

there's no shortage of female speakers. just look at the number of "speakers" at home and in schools :-)

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Barnadine_the_Pirate · 20 days ago

I am actually rather curious about the process for choosing speakers for professional events. I get notices of seminars and conferences and panel discussions on a regular basis, on topics in which I have considerable professional expertise. Gender bias



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basis, on topics in which I have considerable professional expertise. Gender bias aside, often the speakers are not especially knowledgeable on the particular topics and many are considered second-stringers by those of us who are well-versed in those fields. How and why were they chosen? Did a lot of people say "no" before the organizers got down to them, or do these speakers just have a knack for becoming known to the organizers of professional events?

As one colleague remarked, when we were sharing our decision to not attend a particular event due to the identity of the speaker: "if he's so smart, why does he call me for advice whenever he handles something like this in real life?"

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Matthew Kent → Barnadine_the_Pirate · 20 days ago

It depends on the field of discussion, but generally speakers start out by contacting the conference with a topic they wish to present. Depending on the speaker's experience or notoriety, they are put into a selection pool and the conference chooses who presents based on rooms, attendees and the topic being presented. A person who has done a lot of presentations will often be contacted by conferences and offered a slot. There are people who make a living on the lecture circuit, but generally they are consultants looking to attract new clients or people representing a company looking to attract new customers. You would be surprised how much traffic a company can get from sending an employee to do a lecture on a topic that may only fringly relate to their product.

Chances are, if you write up a decent topic and send it to a conference planning committee it will be at least considered as it usually hard to find enough presenters.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Barnadine_the_Pirate → Matthew Kent · 20 days ago

So they ask the best self-promoters to speak, as opposed to the most knowledgeable. Well, that explains a lot of things. Like why I almost never go to conferences.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Matthew Kent → Barnadine_the_Pirate · 20 days ago

This is true, but how many non-self-promoters are willing to stand in front of a group and offer a presentation? I have been to lectures where the guy was clearly forced to be there and it was awkward. For the event managers, finding experts is pretty much limited to past presenters and people who are published. Occasionally, attendees will request someone or for some high level presentations a presenter is required to do their presentation before a panel of experts for selection. It all really depends on the field of study and the level of expertise of the crowd.

The biggest part of conferences is socialization. A bad presentation is a great way of finding other people in your field who have similar expertise. Nothing bonds people like a mutual rolling of the eyes. I also find bad presentations enlightening as it sometimes shows me how others think or why I keep coming across the same errors.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ciaran · 20 days ago

The symposia convened by all-male teams contained 25 percent female speakers on average. For the symposia in which the convener teams included at least one

On average, for the symposia in which the convener teams included at least one woman, women comprised an average of 43 percent of speakers—which meant that including at least one woman among the conveners increased the proportion of female speakers by 72 percent compared with symposia convened by men alone.

In many technical fields, 43% would mean women are greatly over-represented as speakers relative to the percentage of women in the field.

In technical symposia that I have been involved with as an organizer, women were indeed over-represented. The few women available to speak were in great demand. Very junior women were given speaking and panel positions simply because they were available.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Fraga123 → Ciaran · 20 days ago

Excellent. Quotas are important for gender balance.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



datachick · 20 days ago

This issue is indeed more complex than most people realize. And it's a societal issue, not just a women's issue.

My take on why women opt out so much on taking the stage:

<http://blog.infoadvisors.com/i...>

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



edtastic · 19 days ago

Why are men supposed to go through life constantly trying to make women happy?

This is not the kind of gender equality I signed up for and I seriously doubt the author of this piece would spend as much time asking why we have 50% more girls earning degrees today than boys. A gender gap like that doesn't register because not enough ladies got on the panel at scientific conference. This is how elites distract us with their minor issues while huge problems rock the society.

This isn't social justice, it's they mass manipulation by men who already feel obligated to ingratiate themselves with the opposite sex. Taking an existing chivalrous role in the culture and exploiting it by suggesting men must save the women from those nasty misogynist insures few questions will be asked about the priorities.

If that weren't the case we'd have a section called "THE RACES" where we'd talk about how few non whites are in the sciences. Their under representation dwarfs that of women but we won't see these elite white women recognize white men helping them amounts to whites helping each other get ahead. With enough gender focus white supremacy could rise again and feminists would be calling it social justice.

What happened to elevating the under class? Apparently the whites in charge decided rooting for other white women is more fun than taking up the cause of poor minorities which affirmative action was supposed to be helping before white women became it's primary benefactor. Far more energy is invested in gender issues but far larger disparities form on racial lines. The betrayal is hard to ignore.

3 ^ | 2 v · Reply · Share ›




TheBrett · 19 days ago

They should still ask even if the women are too busy to attend the conference, but the trick is then how to phrase what comes next. Do you just say, "We invited So-And-So to attend, but she declined due to time constraints?" Does that offend the person you end up inviting since they know they were secondary?

In any case, the whole "declining fertility in your late 30s" is pretty exaggerated. If we could bust that myth, it would probably help female professionals in science and

elsewhere.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›




Andrew Whitby • 19 days ago

Just because this correlation exists, it doesn't mean that adding a female convenor will result in more female speakers than would otherwise be the case. It's tiring to go on about correlation not equalling causation but this is a perfect example.

I explain why here <http://andrewwhitby.com/2014/0...>

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Mark • 7 days ago

It also takes money to go to these conferences. Most speakers don't get a free ride like the meeting planners and society heads do. I have turned down so many conferences because the expenses for attending were far more than I could afford. This has nothing to do with gender bias.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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